

Vargas adds icing on cake for jubilant Jambos

Happy Hearts moved up to sixth in the 12-strong table for the first time since early in the season with a hard-fought 3-1 victory in the William Hill Premiership over St Mirren in a bruising battle at Tynecastle.

Goals from James Wilson, Calem Nieuwenhof and substitute Kenneth Vargas separated the teams as the Men in Maroon overturned a 1-0 deficit to claim another three points to add to the three they won at St Johnstone on Sunday.

The Jambos now have 36 points and are four adrift of Capital rivals Hibs who entertain Hearts on Sunday (12.30) in a game set for transmission by SkySports.

It was cold at Tynecastle but home fans were hoping to be warmed up by a fine performance from their heroes, separated at kick-off by one point, St Mirren in sixth position in the William Hill Premiership and Hearts seventh.

It was no surprise that The Buddies fielded the same side which defeated Rangers 2-0 at Ibrox on Saturday, but Hearts started with Calem Nieuwenhof, Gerald Taylor and Sander Kartum as head coach, Neil Critchley, rotated his pool in a busy week of three games.

The Buddies pressed high in a scrappy opening period but Lawrence Shankland was busy, winning the ball on the right to initiate the home side's first attack. Elton Kabangu and Saints goalkeeper Zach Hemming collided in the box, but the ball went wide.

Shankland again won the ball in midfield and fed James Penrice but, once again, the attack petered out near the Saints penalty box. Little to warm the home fans so far.

Then Marcus Fraser was poleaxed in the box by Hearts' veteran goalkeeper, Craig Gordon, who rose to punch clear a free-kick from the left. VAR checked the play for an infringement as the player received treatment, but nothing was given.

Nieuwenhof worked himself clear down the left and sent a cross towards the St Mirren goal, but it was cleared comfortably by the well-organised visitors, for whom Richard Taylor and Alex Gogic were prominent in the away side's defence, then the Aussie launched an free-kick into the box from the right but the move came to nothing.

The first corner came after 24 minutes and it was St Mirren who benefited. Mark O'Hara sent a high ball into the box but no shot ensued. Penrice then broke down the left and Kartum connected but Shankland did not test the goalkeeper.

VAR then checked for a penalty against teenager James Wilson after the young striker was then sent through by Shankland. Nothing was given.

Goalmouth action was at a premium but Saints upped their pressure, forcing several nervous clearances, but misplaced passes from both teams punctuated the play.

Saints then capitalised after a high ball into the box. Declan John picked up the ball and his shot was blocked by Michael Steinwender but Mikael Mandron reacted quickly to pick up the rebound and he buried the ball into the net. Time 37 minutes.

The home fans voiced their frustration as St Mirren continued to dominate in midfield, but Taylor powered down the right wing. His pass to Shankland was cleared, another opportunity wasted, then Penrice then tried his luck with a cross from the opposite side but it drifted harmlessly high and wide.

Three extra minutes were added to the tedious first half and Mandron forced Gordon to gather a head flick, but Hearts failed to test Hemming at the other end in the added time

after a disappointing opening session for the home side.

Wilson and Kabangu had been starved of decent ball in the first 45 minutes and that trend continued in the early minutes of the second session, Saints again pressing high, and when the home side attacked they played the ball around the visiting defence, not through it.

Penrice, so often a threat this season, was finding it difficult to get a foothold in the game and so were Hearts who once again struggled to make any real impression.

Beni Banningime at last picked up the ball near his own goal and fed Shankland, but the efficient St Mirren defence did their job, more frustration for home fans, and more boos from the Jambos faithful as St Mirren pressed and won a corner.

Taylor attacked the ball as it came into the six yard box but his header flew just wide of Gordon's right hand post. Toyosi Olusanya then threatened Hearts twice, Gordon saving with his feet and then the same player blasting over the bar.

But the mood at Tynecastle changed in an instant when Wilson pounced on a mistake by Taylor to stab the ball into the net. VAR was called in to check for offside against the teenager but Wilson celebrated. Time 56 minutes.

Saints responded to force a corner at the other end but it was wasted. Suddenly, Hearts were alive and the Gorgie Ultras were in full voice at the Gorgie end. A momentum swing but Taylor wasted an opportunity with a careless cross ball.

A Shankland, Wilson move set up Kabangu on the left, but he blasted high and wide, more groans from Gorgie fans, cue changes from the Tynecastle dugout with Blair Spittal preparing to come on as Nieuwenhof picked up the ball on the edge of the box in a central area.

He dinked to his right and fired a right foot shot into the

corner of the net on his first start since last March to sting Saints. VAR intervened. Joy cut short. Time 63 minutes. Goal approved and Hearts are ahead thanks to the Aussie who also scored a key goal late in the recent Scottish Gas, Scottish Cup win over St Mirren in Paisley.

Kartum departed along with Nieuwenhof for Jorge Grant and Spittal and straight away Kabangu tested Hemming with his left foot. A comfortable save but a rejuvenated Hearts.

Mandron was shown a yellow for a foul on McCart as the Men in Maroon dominated possess and Grant let fly from the right but Hemming collected at the near post.

This was better from Hearts and the referee instantly pulled out his red card after Jamie McCart was flattened by Killian Phillips. The referee moved to the pitch side monitor and viewed the incident several times before removing the red card and replacing it with a yellow. Time 73 minutes.

McCart got back up after treatment but that was a sore one for the former St Johnstone defender. Then John barged into Wilson in midfield as the match became physical, not for the purists this one.

Phillips was withdrawn minutes later with Greg Kiltie replacing him as Hearts pressed for a third.

St Mirren skipper O'Hara was booked for clattering Taylor and Wilson and Kabangu were replaced by Musa Drammeh and Kenneth Vargas with eight regulation minutes left.

Steinwender was forced to clear up from a dangerous cross and a clumsy challenge from Vargas gave Saints another opportunity. They failed to capitalise.

At the other end, Drammeh chased for the ball out on the left touchline and he found Grant whose shot was saved by Hemming. Steinwender blocked a goal-bound shot before Saints introduced

Roland Idowu.

Six minutes of stoppage time were signalled and Grant cleared as Hearts defence were under severe pressure in their own box.

Baningime was next to smother a Saints drive, but Hearts moved upfield and Shankland (pictured), with a cute back heel, Grant and Vargas linked for a late strike, the ball bulged the net but VAR ran a check and, after a lengthy delay, the Costa Rica striker celebrated his fourth of the season.